1:Layard E-5 (1914-1915) 1942
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CHAPTER VIII

MARRIAGE AND DIVORCE

MARRIAGE

Polygamy.

THERE being no chiefs on Vao, or on any of the Small Islands, the practice of polygamy, common throughout Malekula, is not carried to any great lengths. The greatest number of wives possessed by any man at the time of my visit was four. Godefroy, writing nearly twenty years later, says that in 1933 there was only one man with as many as three, and that not more than half, or possibly a third, of the married men have more than one.[1] The rest have two, which is considered by most to be the ideal number. There is, however, no social compulsion to have more than one, and some men of wealth and influence of high Maki rank content themselves with a single wife.

The result of this, and of the high bride-price to which all near paternal relatives (that is to say all members of the suitor's Lodge) contribute, is the late age of marriage, which rarely takes place before the husband is 25. The competition to obtain wives shows itself in the early age at which girls are betrothed (see pp. 192, 193).

There are two main methods by which a man acquires a second wife:

(*a*) by inheritance of the wife of a deceased elder brother;[2]
(*b*) by choice.

In either case an additional wife is a definite asset, not only in providing children, but also in helping in his gardens. Since, when a man feeds at home, and on certain ritual occasions, his wife cooks for him, this aspect of marriage is somewhat cynically expressed by the phrase that a man with two wives is "master of two cooks."

THE RITUAL OF MARRIAGE

I give here two accounts of the marriage rites, a short one recorded by myself and a longer one by Godefroy.

[1] Godefroy, I, 1933, p. 134.
[2] See p. 135. Godefroy (I, 1933, p. 34) asserts that it is usually the deceased's elder brother who, as chief provider of the bride-price, usually inherits his deceased younger brother's wife. This was, at the time of my visit, forbidden, and if it is allowed now, must be the result of a break-up of the old kinship regulations.

2: Layard E-5 (1914-1915) 1936
0012 Malekula 0012
Small Islands

who had returned to his own people and was busy reviving the fortunes of his village in the same way. These two men were among my best informants, since they themselves were conscious learners from the older men and, like all learners, the most capable of passing on their knowledge.

Nor were the people of Atchin averse to using such aspects of the white man's material culture as would seem to them to further their interests. Though stone tools were still used for gardening and shell tools for carving, some natives possessed knives, but such things were not common, and the degradation in plastic art which everywhere followed on their introduction had, at the time of my visit, only recently begun to show itself. It seemed, by the way, most curious to me that, with the tremendous labour of digging in hard ground with nothing better than hard-wood sticks, no white man had thought of introducing more efficient agricultural implements, but none such existed. The hard-earned white man's money obtained on distant plantations was used almost exclusively with two objects in view. One was the purchase of whaleboats to replace their former long-distance canoes in order to facilitate the trade in and exchange of pigs in other islands. The second, closely connected with it, had as its result the only real benefit conferred by the white man, indirectly and without his knowledge, on the native. When I arrived on Atchin I was surprised at the number of young men who spoke pidgin English. It was not till I had been some time on the island that the reason for this became apparent. One of the least desirable aspects of the social system in this and the neighbouring islands was polygamy which, since most of the older men had two wives, effectually prevented the younger men from marrying until a comparatively late age. Wives are bought with the most valuable currency known in Atchin, namely pigs. So the younger men seized the opportunity created by the system of indentured labour to sign on for three years, without, like other natives, running up debts at the trader's store, so that with the money thus earned they might, on their return, buy pigs with which to purchase wives. This wholly beneficial revolution in the social machinery was in full swing at the time of my visit, but Mr. Harrisson tells me, and this is one of the most interesting points of comparison between then and now, that the old men have now turned tables on the young, and by devaluing the pig in terms of women and increasing the bride-price from eight or nine pigs to fifty or sixty, have thus restored the old equilibrium, and incidentally, presumably, their own authority. When we reflect upon the fact that the young men twenty-two years ago are the older men now we have a useful sidelight on one of the mechanisms governing the rise and fall of revolutions.

Another effect of the increased wealth in pigs thus gained was the elimination of the lower grades from the *Maki* hierarchy. This process was not primarily due to the wealth so gained, but, like so many other changes in native custom, was very much accentuated by it. In all other parts of Malekula the *Maki*, as has already been pointed out, is a graded hierarchy in which the grades are taken by individuals, and the taking of them demands great expenditure of pigs and other forms of wealth, so that when a man has reached the highest grade called *Mal* he is a very great man and jealous of his distinction. The tendency in such districts was consequently to increase the number of pre-

2: Layard E-5 (1914-1915) 1936
OO12 Malekula OO12
Small Islands

of the white man made this position untenable, and they could conceive no possible compromise. If the white man stayed they must die out, as had so many of their neighbours. Some of the young men also said, "What, if this be the case, is the use of rearing children?" and there is no doubt that among this section of the community abortions were common, as pedigrees bear out in the clear diminution of the number of births. There was however a third section of the community, the younger men who had never known the time before the white man came, who were already born into an atmosphere of inevitable compromise, for whom the glamour of the white man's superior material civilization was tempered with a shrewd sense of his weaknesses and some knowledge of how to deal with him. These were the men who were bent on rehabilitating Atchin culture, while at the same time incorporating into it such new elements as seemed not to conflict too greatly with it. One such was Lawak, then my chief friend and informant, now, according to Mr. Harrisson, the most influential man on the island, who had spent two years of his youth in the French penal settlement of Noumea, who was one of the few young men of my day to take to him two wives, and who, his first wife being sick, himself reared her baby son by feeding him on the juices of fruits; nor shall I ever forget his delight when the boy first began to run. I must confess that in 1914, while admiring their efforts, I had little hope in their ultimate success. Time has shown otherwise. The population has increased and is increasing now. It is to such men as Lawak who, through knowledge of the white man and how to deal with him, had hope in the future but at the same time preserved their independence of mind and love of their own culture, that the present increase in population and renaissance of culture is due.

The author is hoping to publish a detailed account of the social organization, religion, language, music, and sea-faring activities of the inhabitants of the small islands off the north-east coast of Malekula, in a series of volumes entitled, 'Stone Men of Malekula.' The first volume, dealing with the island of Vao, is to appear this autumn.

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